

## A deplorable principle with deplorable effects

I must say I agree entirely with the points you made in the last editorial ('The old order changes', *ET*52, Oct 97) about the pressure on academics to publish (or perish) – a deplorable principle with deplorable effects – and the need to maintain a policy of encouraging informative and lively articles in a readable style. It is no criticism at all to say that *English Today* is not really the place for pieces to be submitted for the next Research Assessment Exercise. There are plenty of other (better) reasons for publication.

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**The editor responds** We continue to deplore this development and its actual and potential impact on *ET*. Let me repeat my comment here and invite further responses from readers: **'Academic pressures** There is an ongoing and increasing pressure on academics these days to publish or just fall by the wayside, a pressure reflected in much of the material that comes to us. Keeping the length of our articles down and their style as transparent as possible is therefore not easy, because the academic stereotype is dense and lengthy argument accompanied by thickets of references. However, we'll go on seeking the mix of economy, clarity, immediacy, and readability for which *ET* has become known.'

## The years ahead

Even in Greenwich mis-spellings of MILLENNIUM can be found (cf. Barry Newman, *ET*52, Oct 97).

Indeed, one establishment

close to the Meridian Line hedges its bets. "THE MILLENNIUM CAFÉ," announces the smart sign above the shop, but the menu board standing outside proclaims, in equally smart signwriting, "THE MILLENIUM CAFÉ."

As we say in these parts, you pays your money and you takes your choice. What really concerns me though is the change we are about to undergo in voicing the years. Is Stanley Kubrick ("2001: A Space Odyssey") to blame for our counting by the hundred up to 1999 (1066, 1900, 1945 etc), and thence by the thousand? Or will we say "twenty-o-one"?!

David L. Seymour,  
London, England

## Say 'Trentatré'!

Don Odello in *ET*52 is puzzled because Italian doctors have chest patients say 'Trentatré' while English speaking doctors require 'ninety-nine'.

French-speaking doctors require 'trente-trois', semantically equal to the Italian. But the obvious reason for choice is the resonant vowels, stressed, [ã] and [(w)a]; in English, [aɪ], [aɪ]. The Italian choice is inferior, with [e], [e] if I am not mistaken. You may enquire in Cambridge or elsewhere for a German equivalent. Would not Italian doctors be better served with 'quarantaquattro'?

David I. Masson  
Leeds, England

## What's in a name?

World trade is global, but the English language is not, since its penetration is not total, and is unlikely to become so. Rather it is 'mondial'. Indeed, it is the only remaining mondial language, a fact which even France has reluctantly admitted.

Mondial English could be known, variously, as Sabic English (from the acronym SABIC – Shared, American, British, Irish and Commonwealth), Nuclish (a portmanteau word from Lord Randolph Quirk's phrase Nuclear English), or Lango (Latino English/Anglo Latin/Language of English Origin).

Robert Craig,  
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## Grunts, snorts, and clicks

I have been an enthusiastic reader of *English Today* since several years ago when I happened to read one of your issues. As a teacher of English in a university I know how important it is to know about not only the history of English, but also the development of it. Most articles in *ET* help me a lot in understanding the nature of the worldwide language, as well as in my teaching. I sometimes make special efforts to introduce what I learned from *ET* to my class, which turns out to be quite successful and welcome by my students. Take *A Versatile Suffix* (*ET*28, Oct 91) for example. My students were greatly interested in such word formation.

If this can be regarded as a hobby or pastime in my spare time, others may be of great importance in enriching my know-how about the latest development in the world of science, such as Internet and E-mail. I have read all the articles regarding such topics in *ET*, which makes me more knowledgeable than others, since such terms are novelties to most people around me. And here I'd like to take this opportunity to extend my sincere thanks to all of you for offering us so many wonderful articles.

Recently I began to take interest in the usages and the textual functions of interjections, which are widely used in oral English.

In my opinion, such words may be misunderstood if we are not familiar with their usages. For example, I ask a man: "Excuse me, can I take this bus to the train station? And he replies "Uh-uh." How can I understand him? It seems to me that the most expressive words in English are not words at all but shorthand sounds that represent complex thoughts – grunts, moans, snorts, clicks and whistles compounded by facial expressions and physical gestures: *uh, huh, huh, hey, oop, boy, gee*, etc. Unfortunately articles on such topics are seldom found in magazines or books.

Any information about such matters will be greatly appreciated.

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## Anglicisms and freedom of linguistic expression

I can't understand why *ET* spreads itself so much about foreign English-borrowings. The reproachful article upon the subject by Ross Smith (*ET*52, Oct 97) is typical, as are the tactless howlers gleefully extracted from overseas sources. The universal practice of adopting someone else's helpful and appealing utterances in the human dynamic is scarcely remarkable. As to its desirability, the question rests upon whether personal choice or coercion is involved. Are you and am I to exercise freedom of linguistic expression? Are other people on earth entitled to the same freedom? If not, who is to make such a decision for us? A well-informed examination of these questions, it seems to me, deserves at least equal time within your interesting publication.

Dick Ogden,  
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British Columbia, Canada

**The Editor responds** There are at least two reasons for including articles on the adoption of English words into other languages: (1) The area interests the kind of people who would like to be published in *ET*; (2) Assessments of the extent to which English is entering other languages, and of the fields in which this happens, help us understand more clearly the impact of English worldwide. We would happily provide space for a feature of the kind Dick Ogden suggests, on freedom of linguistic expression, but to date nobody has offered us one. From an editorial point of view, receiving simultaneous offers from two observers willing to write about Anglicisms in two kinds of Spanish, each writer unknown to the other, was manna from linguistic heaven. It is true that Ross Smith's article deplores aspects of the adoption of Anglicisms into Iberian Spanish, and that we publish commentary on some of the stranger kinds of English that occur around the world, but such matters are a large part of what is happening to English. At the same time, however, the approach in such articles as Jeff Griffin's on English in Polish advertisements (*ET*50, Apr 97) and Robert Baumgardner's on English in Mexican Spanish (*ET*52, Oct 97) has been calmly objective. I welcome other readers' comments.

**Ross Smith responds** I think Mr Ogden has been a bit unfair lumping me into the same category as those who gloat over "howlers". My article was critical, but the approach was not the sadly common "haw haw, look at these poor foreigners trying to get their tongues around our unpronounceable and eccentric language", which I obviously find reprehensible. Quite the opposite; I am inside looking out, not outside looking in, in both geographical and sentimental terms. My approach is that of one who is concerned that something he holds in very high esteem is in

danger of being spoilt. Judging from Robert Baumgardner's piece which was published alongside mine, that danger is very real in northern Mexico, where he reports that genuine linguistic intermingling between Spanish and English is taking place (it would be interesting to know if the situation is the same in southern Mexico). My article contained some jocular references simply with a view to making it more amenable, since I imagine that most *ET* readers know no Spanish. I entirely agree that people should be able to exercise freedom of linguistic expression, as Mr Ogden says. Nevertheless, one inevitably comes up against the much-discussed and very complex issue of uniformity versus diversity. I essentially prefer diversity (even though there is much to be said for a world-wide lingua franca), and therefore would like Spanish to continue being as different as possible. To achieve this, it would help if we could eliminate English loans and calques which serve no useful purpose at all. This may be impossible but there is no harm trying, and being critical of those who use the English language gratuitously as a badge of social status.

## Anglo-blends in Italy as well as Japan

From one corner of the globe to another, many of the points made by Kyoko Takashi Wilkerson ('Japanese Bilingual Brand Names', *ET*52, Oct 97) hold very true – and certainly in Italy. Brand names here are also often a blend of Italian and English, sometimes with clever wordplays. Some examples: *Candyclean* (washing machines – *candido* means 'spotlessly clean'); *Rotohome* (rolls of aluminium foil and clingfilm – 'roll' is *rotolo* in Italian); *Nutella* (a hazelnut and chocolate spread – 'nut' plus *-ella*, a typically Italian ending); *Lucart* (toilet paper, produced in Lucca

and for the 'loo', of course, while *carta* is paper); *Bebi Mia* ('my baby' – a doll); *AirOne* (Italian airline – the Italian word *airone* meaning 'heron'). One other little point to make relating to Wilkerson's article. The word *pittore* (Panel 7) is not pseudo-Italian, but actual Italian. It means 'painter', which would seem to be fairly apt for a brand of brushes (even if they are intended for dusting and cleaning purposes).

Nigel J. Ross,  
Milan, Italy

## Rambam at the yimka

Previously, I have argued that the recent American slang expression "to cut a deal," was originally a translation of a common Hebrew idiom for making agreements (ET46, Apr 96). Here, I want to show that the contemporary American love for acronyms, if not directly derived from Hebrew, has a centuries-old prototype in that language.

I am sure that this fondness for acronyms influences the names Americans give to things, because we want to be able to pronounce their initials. For example, physicians have identified a seasonal affective disorder that can make us SAD from lack of sunlight. What would we have called the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) if it had been named, instead, the Canada, United States, Mexico Free Trade Agreement? When my school, California State College, Bakersfield, became a university, many were fearful that it would be called "C-Sub."

A rash of abbreviations has sprung up in electronic communication on the Internet. However, IMHO (in my humble opin-

ion), most of these are not true acronyms. They are intended to be seen, but not necessarily spoken aloud. For example, how would one pronounce RTFM (Read the f\*\*\*\*\* manual)?

Acronyms are such a common part of our lives today that many Americans no longer know the origin of some of them. How many, for example, know that ARCO was, once upon a time, the Atlantic-Richfield Company? I suspect that many investors who buy stock through NASDAQ do not know that the initials stand for the National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations. Increasingly, I have seen the word written Nasdaq, so that the acronym has become a word in its own right. So far, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade is called GATT, but not yet written as Gatt.

Radar became a common noun early. My 1946 dictionary capitalizes the word and explains it as a device for "ra(dio) d(etecting) a(nd) r(anging)," but more recent dictionaries call it radar, lower case. The Korean War and television made Radar with a capital into a character on "M.A.S.H.," formerly a "medical and surgical hospital."

The use of acronyms in the U.S. is increasing, and they seem to migrate easily from one language to another. Americans who are interested in the politics of Mexico will speak of the ruling party as the PRI, even though, in English, the initials in the acronym stand for the Institutional Revolutionary Party. In Spanish, la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura becomes UNESCO, not ONU ECC, which would be difficult to pronounce in any language.

The use of acronyms has a long history in Hebrew, where they became widely used centuries ago. Creating them was and is especially easy in Hebrew, because its alphabet consists exclusively of consonants. Vowels are optional in the written language, and vowels can be added to any set of initials to create a new word. Thus, the Hebrew Bible (*Torah, Nebiim, Qethubim*; Law, Prophets and Writings) is commonly called TaNaQ or Tanak. That word is treated as an English word in some recent dictionaries.

The eleventh century commentator, Rabbi Solomon (Shelomoh) Isaac, became Rashi, an acronym composed of the three initial consonants of his title and name in Hebrew. ("I. yodh, can be a consonant or vowel in Hebrew, like English "y".) The famous twelfth century Jewish physician and philosopher is known in the west as Maimonides, which is actually Greek for "son of Maimon". His Hebrew name, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, is shortened to Rambam. More recently, the Jerusalem YMCA has become the "yimka".

The human tendency to abbreviate, shorten and simplify is universal. We would be calling television "TV" or "tele" today, even if Hebrew never existed. However, for centuries before English was spoken in North America, a pattern of creating acronyms had already been long established in Hebrew, the same pattern used so easily in American speech and writing today.

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